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ON THE DATE OF *THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE*

In Mr. Henry Barrett Hinckley's suggestive argument for the earlier date of *The Owl and the Nightingale*¹ he says, "But the reading of the Cotton MS alone should have warned us against this conclusion since the verb *under-wat* has the meaning of a present tense and shows that the scribe understood that Henry was still living when the prayer was offered." The evidence from the C reading *under-wat* has some extremely doubtful features. In the first place, the textual evidence is at least as strong against the correctness of the C reading as for it. It is a priori just as likely that the C scribe here should have mistaken a *ȝ* in his original for a *þ* as that the J scribe in writing *under-yat* mistook a *þ* for a *ȝ*. (In line 1469 the C scribe mistook *þ* for *ȝ*, writing *ȝif* for *wif*.) Moreover, Breier² on a fresh examination of the MSS declares for *under-pat* as the reading in C 1091, assuming that the scribe has mistaken *ȝ* for *p*, though it must be admitted that he might equally well have taken *þ* for *p*, as he did in 187.

But even if we accept *under-wat*, Mr. Hinckley's contention that it is a present tense rests upon the insecure assumption that the word is a compound of the preterit-present verb *witan*, *wāt*. Breier³ points out that Bradley-Stratmann's sole citation for the ME compound is this passage. It is usually assumed that the word is *underwīten*, in which case *under-wāt* is preterit after all, not preterit-present. In a matter so important as this, other evidence should be furnished not merely for the existence of *underwīten*, but for a preterit-present *underwāt*.

Whether we read *under-wat* or *under-yat*, there is well-nigh conclusive evidence that it is a past tense. And the same evidence points strongly to *under-ȝat* as the original. Close attention to the highly dramatic nature of the debate at this point shows that in 1091,

pat under-wat (*yat*) *þe* king Henri,

the nightingale is turning against the owl her own statement in 1055:

þe louerd *pat* sone under-ȝat.

¹ *Modern Philology*, XVII, 252.

² *Eule und Nachtigal*, Halle, 1910, p. 161.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

There the owl, after asserting that the nightingale had misled the lady to commit sin, says, "The lord at once discovered this [*bat* in unemphatic position] and laid a snare to catch you." The nightingale replies with great skill (cf. 1067-74) that the apparent triumph of this lord was really his ignominious defeat: "His own disgrace was brought about by his treatment of me,—that King Henry discovered and punished." Here the emphatic position of *bat* and *king Henri* gives the retort a peculiar a fortiori force: "*his* act was discovered by King Henry himself!" C 1055 is then not merely a parallel passage for *under-wat* in 1091, but is inseparably connected with it in the give and take of the two contestants. Either a different verb or a present tense in 1091 would quite obliterate the dramatic connection.

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